

Guenter Getzinger
Inter-University Research Centre for Technology, Work and Culture (IFF/IFZ)
Schloegelgasse 2
A-8010 Graz
Phone: +43-316-81 39 09-34
Fax: +43-316-81 02 74
getzinger@ifz.tu-graz.ac.at

Communicating Science – a Precondition for Sustainable Development

The university course “Science communication” in Vienna, education for science journalists and for those responsible for science PR

The university course “Science communication” is a two-semester, post graduate course, offered at the Vienna branch of the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies of Austrian Universities: Klagenfurt, Vienna, Innsbruck and Graz (IFF). It has been developed by the “leading-team” Markus Arnold, Roland Fischer, Guenter Getzinger, Oliver Hochadel and Klaus Taschwer.

It will start in October 2002 and makes possible an as well practice-oriented as theoretically funded education for 15 participants in the fields of science journalism and science-public relations.

Radical changes in our society caused by developments in science and technology, lead to a sustaining shift of our living and working conditions. These changes and shifts need to be communicated, a “translation” between science and the public is needed. Only the informed public is able to be involved into processes of design and in decisions on the appropriate use of technologies. And only a democratically legitimised, a democratically embedded technology can contribute to a sustainable society.

In German-speaking countries – especially in Austria – there are lots of deficits in qualified communication of science, as, for example, compared to countries like Great Britain or the USA. In these countries communication of science plays a much more important role in media, in universities, but also in companies or non governmental organisations – this is true for the education of science communication in general.

A relevant education for science journalist does not exist in Austria. It is more or less the same situation concerning science PR. While the demand for professional communication is increasing – e.g. with respect to the now also in Austria expanding biotechnology and related industries – most of the persons responsible for public relations are autodidacts.

The participants of the now introduced university course will be offered a tailor-cut theoretical as well as practical programme that will train them for the mentioned jobs in a very significant way. The training strongly stresses the acquisition of practical skills, which means that the co-operation with media, museums and departments for public relations of companies and research institutions is of special importance. Job expectancies of alumni should be improved by intensive contacts with potential employers during the course. The scope of science communication is a very dynamic one and it is easy to predict that new job-fields are emerging and will be developed by alumni, too.

The course “Science communication” aims at developing competencies to present science and research successfully in the public, to write about science and technology as a journalist, and to comment its social relevance in a critical way. The aim is to establish a professional and reflected culture of science journalism in Austria. To guarantee the latter special modules are part of the course dedicated to analyse the “science industry” and to interpret the interrelations between sciences and manifold publics in a modern society.

The development of the last years has shown that the synapses between science, the public and politics are of growing importance. Science and technology is interconnected with more and more social subsystems: The development of science and technology is increasingly dependent of and structured by the needs, wants, and reservations of society. On the other side society and its development is highly dependent on its ability to learn to handle science and technology in a competent manner.

The media as critical commentators as well as public relations of research institutions have to contribute in their different ways to professional science communication.

The university course “Science communication” wants to support these institutions by offering a working situation appropriate for participants already working in these institutions. The course is offered for students in full-time or part-time employment. Competencies of the participants should be developed in three areas – each connected to the other:

Social competence and competence for reflection

In science journalism as well as in science PR science communicators have to meet high standards of perceiving the fields of tension of different interests and needs they are working in. A precondition for professional dealing with different roles and functions is to be able to critically reflect one’s own role– this is the endeavour during the whole course. Questioning sustainability and social and ecological soundness of science and technology are permanent challenges of the course.

Training journalistic and other practical competencies

In practice, science communication has its basis in the classical skills of journalism: finding the theme, investigation and writing. Furthermore, science communicators have to develop skills in using different media and forms and ways of presentation, to be able to communicate through different “channels” in their profession.

Evaluation competence

Science communication cannot be reduced to mere transportation of information. What is of importance is the selection and evaluation knowledge. To perceive contexts of knowledge and knowledge production, to see the interrelations between different areas, is of utmost importance: Knowledge of the backgrounds of knowledge production, backgrounds of research, of financing and organising science and research. On what do I have to keep an eye?

How to place actors in the science system with regard to the political and social developments in the last years? Who are the stakeholders?

The modules of the course

A relation full of tension: media – science – the public

Production of texts in science and science journalism

Public understanding of science in discussion

Ethics in media and science

Technology Assessment

This is the way science works: practice – policies – organisation

Selected disciplines at the place of research

Development of universities in international comparison

Science policy in practice

To make a picture of science: how to “transport” in what forms

Forms of presentation: narrative and statistics

How to use pictures

Museum, exhibition and knowledge

Science department: investigate – write – edit

Basics and preconditions of media work

Writing workshop and journalists’ conference

More than print: Fields of practice in science communication

Science in the web and in broadcasting

Organising symposia and moderation

Looking at the target audience, using the appropriate means: Public Relations and fundraising

Professional media work for scientific institutions and companies

Fundraising in science (communication)